

BOOTPRINT RANCH AND CURRANT CREEK CONSERVATION  
EASEMENTS PROPOSAL



# WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2020)

1. **Region:** 5 **Regional Supervisor:** Barb Beck

**Name of Applicant(s):** Ashley Taylor

2. **Date:** 05/29/2020

3. **Project Name:** Bootprint Ranch and Currant Creek Conservation Easements  
**Type of Project:** Easement

4. **Size:** This conservation easement proposal is for two separate ranches that are owned by the same family. The family wants to put conservation easements on both properties to pass the ranches to the next generation.

Bootprint Ranch consists of 3,416 deeded and 3,200 leased BLM and DNRC acres. The property also provides access to approximately 1,190 BLM acres of legally adjoining public lands. Sum recreational access provided by the project 7,806 acres.

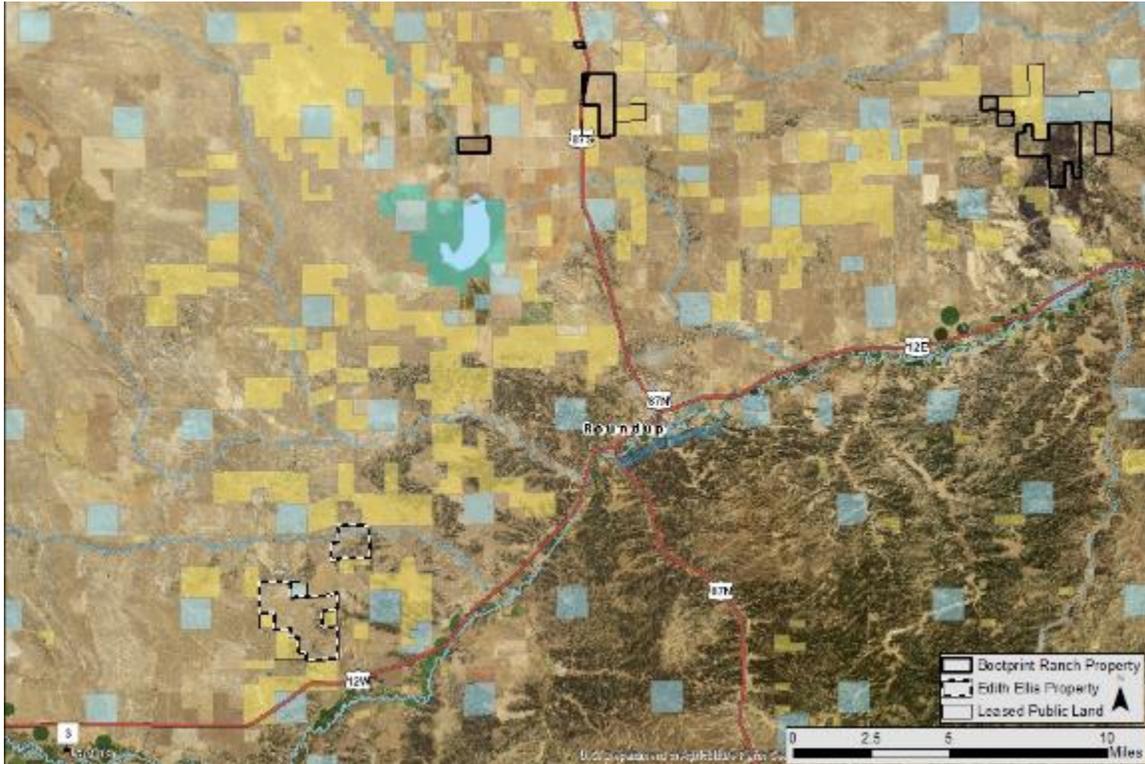
Edith Ellis Ranch consists of 3,143 deeded and 960 leased BLM and DNRC acres. The property also provides access to approximately 8,960 (7,680 BLM and 1,280 DNRC) acres of legally adjoining public lands. Sum recreational access provided by the project is 13,063 acres.

Sum acres between the two properties are 6,559 deeded and 4,160 leased BLM and DNRC acres. Sum recreational access provided by the two properties is 20,869 acres.

5. **Location:** Bootprint Ranch is divided into three parcels. Two parcels are nine (9) miles north of Roundup and the other parcel is seventeen (17) miles northeast of Roundup. Edith Ellis Ranch is divided into two parcels both are twelve (12) miles west of Roundup. Both properties are in Musselshell County in FWP Region 5.

6. **Map(s):**

Figure 1. Bootprint Ranch and Edith Ellis property boundaries and leased public lands.



7. **Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.** The Bootprint Ranch consists of sagebrush grassland and ponderosa pine savannah, which provide habitat for a diverse assemblage of species, including sage grouse, elk, pronghorn, mule deer, Merriam’s turkeys, black-tailed prairie dogs and other native species populations, including at least 37 “Species of Concern”. Therefore, these habitats are beneficial in maintaining huntable and viewable populations of game and non-game species, both migratory and resident. Elevation ranges from 3,300 – 3,800 feet. Forested habitats consist of ponderosa pine, Rocky Mountain juniper, and Wyoming big sagebrush. Large sagebrush grassland expanses provide critical mule deer and sage grouse winter range consisting of Wyoming big sagebrush and silver sagebrush. The FWP Sage Grouse Research Project documented sage grouse use of the area. Native grass vegetation is a mix mostly comprised of rough fescue, Idaho fescue, blue bunch wheatgrass, little blue stem, and common forbs interspersed such as sweet clover, vetch, and yarrow.

The Ellis Ranch has the same elevation range and suite of plant and wildlife species but has more prairie grassland habitat and less sagebrush grassland. Carrant Creek also flows for two river miles through the property and has some cottonwood species, sedges, rushes, and cattails that commonly make up riparian habitats in these high clay content soils.

Terms of the conservation easement will ensure perpetual protection and management of the habitat to benefit wildlife and native plants, while allowing the Bootprint and Ellis Ranches to continue their private operation. The landowner and easement terms will continue maintaining and improving the habitat while providing recreational access for future generations.

Bootprint Ranch - Sagebrush Steppe Habitat



Bootprint Ranch - Sagebrush Grassland Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat



Bootprint Ranch - Sagebrush Steppe/Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat



Bootprint Ranch – Stock Pond



Bootprint Ranch – Sagebrush Steppe and Ponderosa Pine Habitat. Wildfire effects from 2017 shown along ridge.



Bootprint Ranch – Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat burned in 2017.



Edith Ellis Ranch - Prairie Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Prairie Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Prairie Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Currant Creek



Edith Ellis Ranch – Currant Creek flowing through sagebrush grassland.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Currant Creek (Pictures taken in early March before green up)



Edith Ellis Ranch – Currant Creek



Edith Ellis Ranch – Sagebrush Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Currant Creek flowing through sagebrush grassland.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Prairie Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Prairie Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Currant Creek flowing through sagebrush grassland.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Sagebrush Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Sagebrush Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



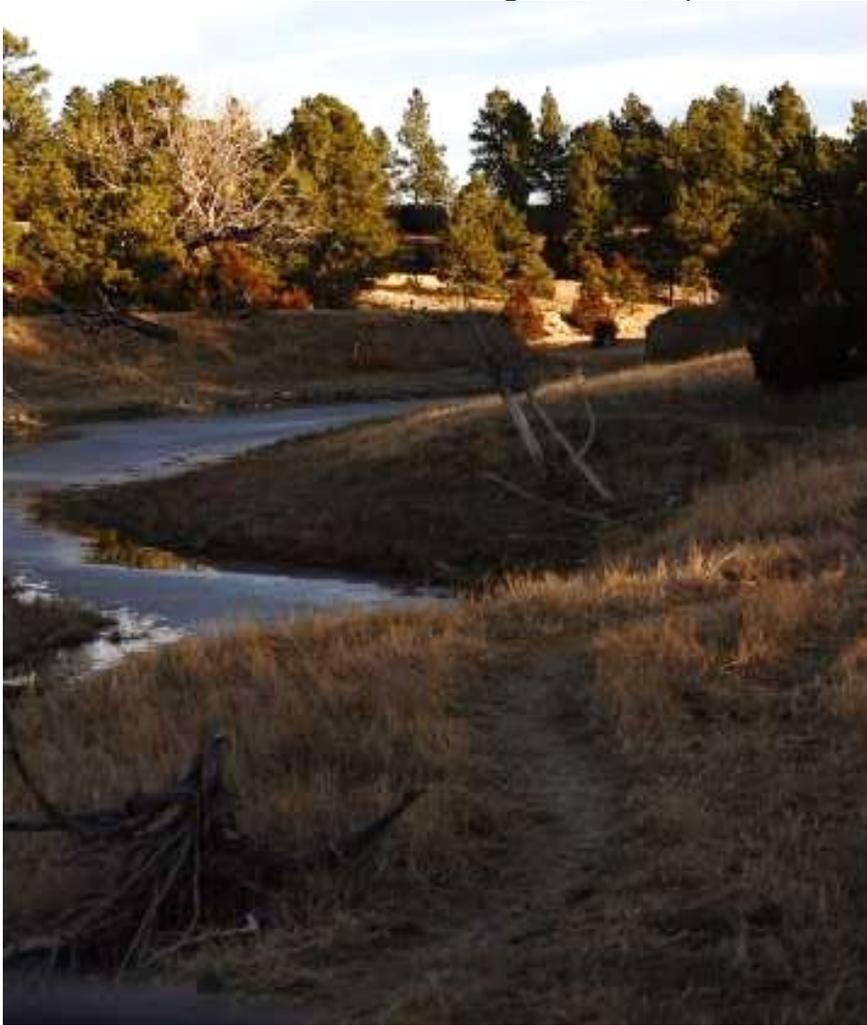
Edith Ellis Ranch – Elk standing in Sagebrush Grassland and Ponderosa Pine.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Elk in hayfield and ponderosa pine habitat.



Edith Ellis – Un-named creek flowing from stock pond.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Prairie Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



Edith Ellis Ranch – Sagebrush Grassland and Ponderosa Pine Savanna Habitat.



**Statewide Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.** The Bootprint Ranch lies within the Northwestern Great Plains Ecoregion. Approximately 580 acres (17%) is in CRP or dryland hay fields. The rest of the property's community type composition is approximately 45% Conifer Dominated Forest and Woodland (xeric), 27% Sagebrush Steppe, 10% Prairie Grassland, and 1% Herbaceous Marsh. In 2017, approximately 1,000 acres of ponderosa pine savanna habitat burned in a wildfire. A lot of the pine trees are still standing, and the understory is regenerating. Approximately 75% of the ranch is within the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) Tier I Terrestrial Community Type (human land use), 2% is Tier II and 23% is Tier III (Figure 2). Bootprint Ranch property is within the Devils Basin Tier I Focal Area (SWAP 2015, Figure 3) and the Governor's Executive Order Sage Grouse Core Area and General Habitat (Figure 4).

The Ellis Ranch property lies within the Northwestern Great Plains Ecoregion. Approximately 100 acres (3%) is dryland hay field on the property. The rest of the property's community type composition is approximately 70% Prairie Grassland, 12% Sagebrush Steppe, 7% Conifer Dominated Forest and Woodlands (xeric), 5% Deciduous Shrubland, and 3% Herbaceous Marsh. Approximately 88% of the ranch is within SWAP Tier I Terrestrial Community Type and 12% is Tier III (human land use, Figure 2). Approximately two miles of Currant Creek flows through the northern portion of the property. Ellis Ranch property is also in the Bull Mountain Focal Area Tier II (SWAP 2015, Figure 5) and the Governor's Executive Order Sage Grouse General Habitat (Figure 4).

Bootprint Ranch is within the Lower Musselshell Aquatic Focal Area Tier 1 – Top Priority (SWAP 2015, Figure 6). This Focal Area is spread across a large area downstream of Roundup. In addition, the Northern Red Belly Dace, a Species of Concern, inhabits Currant Creek which flows through the Ellis property.

Figure 2. Bootprint and Edith Ellis Ranches overlaid on the SWAP Terrestrial Community Type Tiers. Human disturbance to habitat is the lowest in Tier I and increases in Tiers II and III.

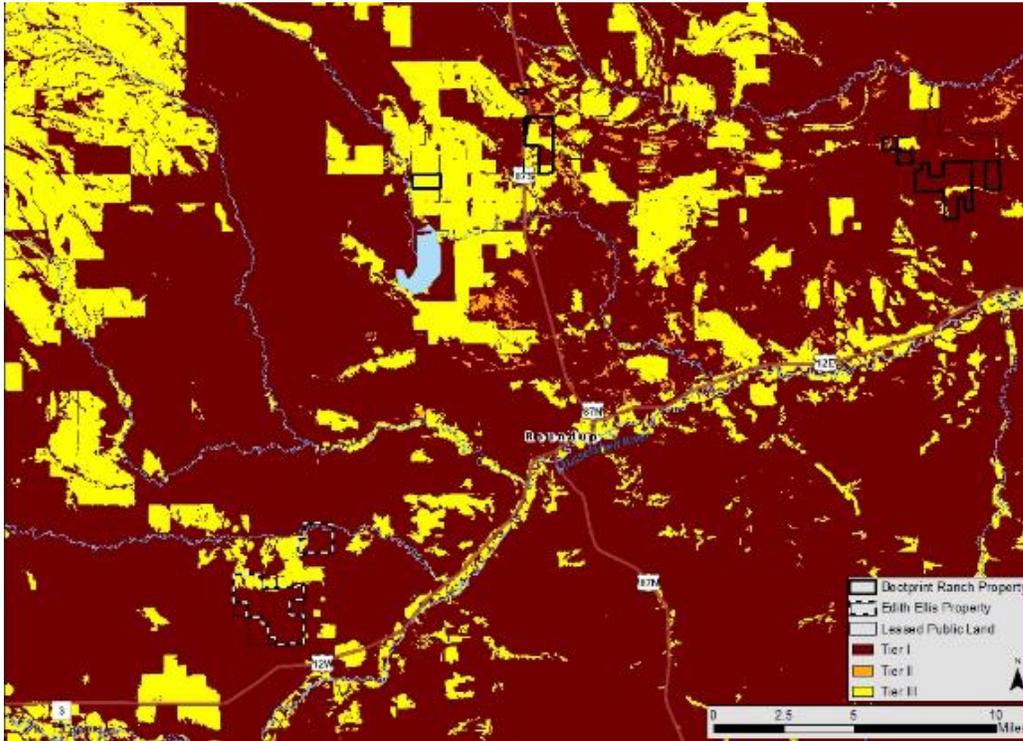


Figure 3. Bootprint and Edith Ellis Ranches overlaid on the SWAP Devil's Basin Tier I Focal Area.

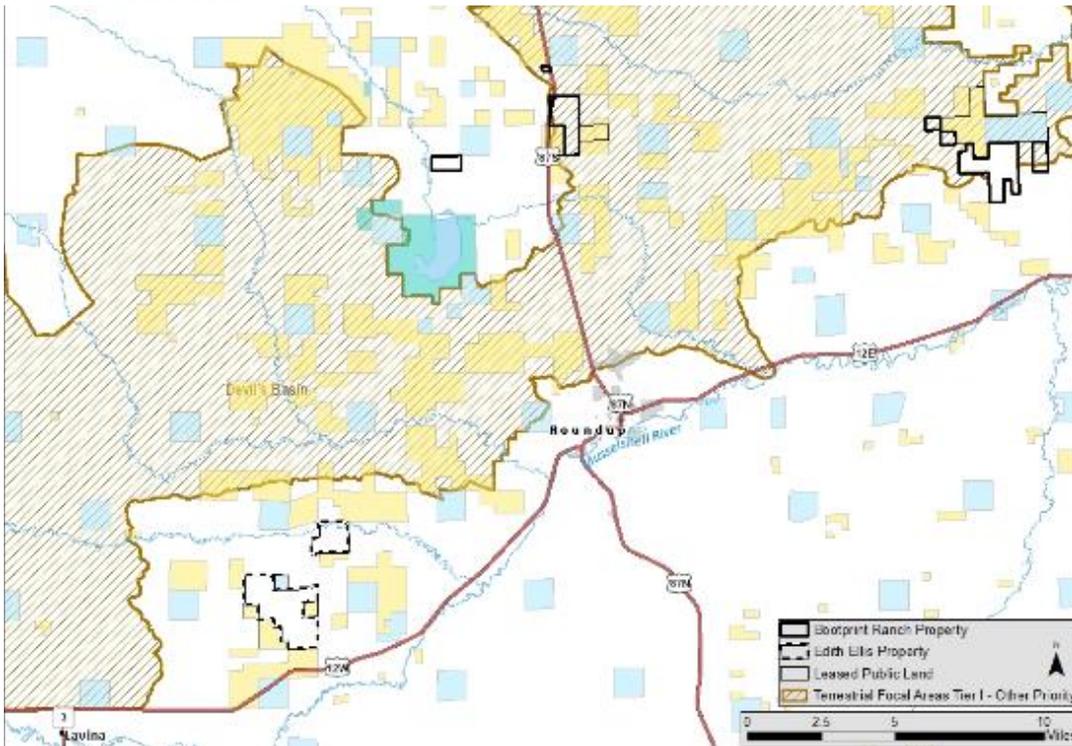


Figure 4. Footprint and Edith Ellis Ranches overlaid on the Governor's Executive Order Sage Grouse Core Area and General Habitat.

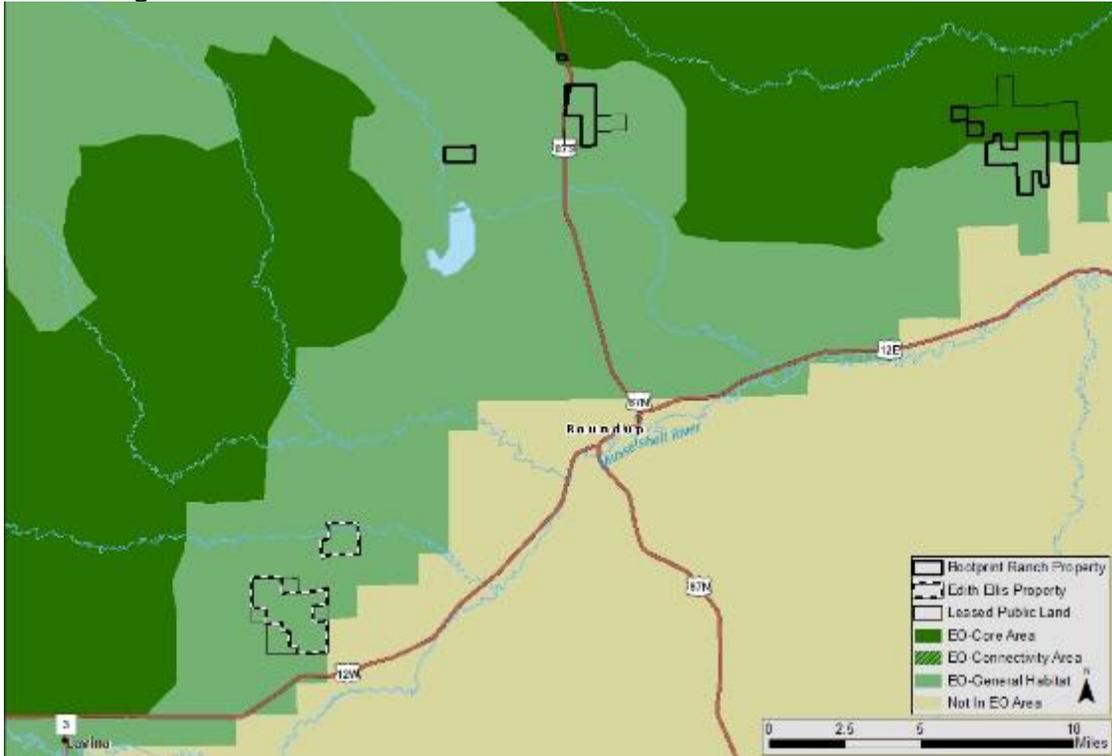


Figure 5. Footprint and Edith Ellis Ranches overlaid on the SWAP Bull Mountain Focal Area Tier II.

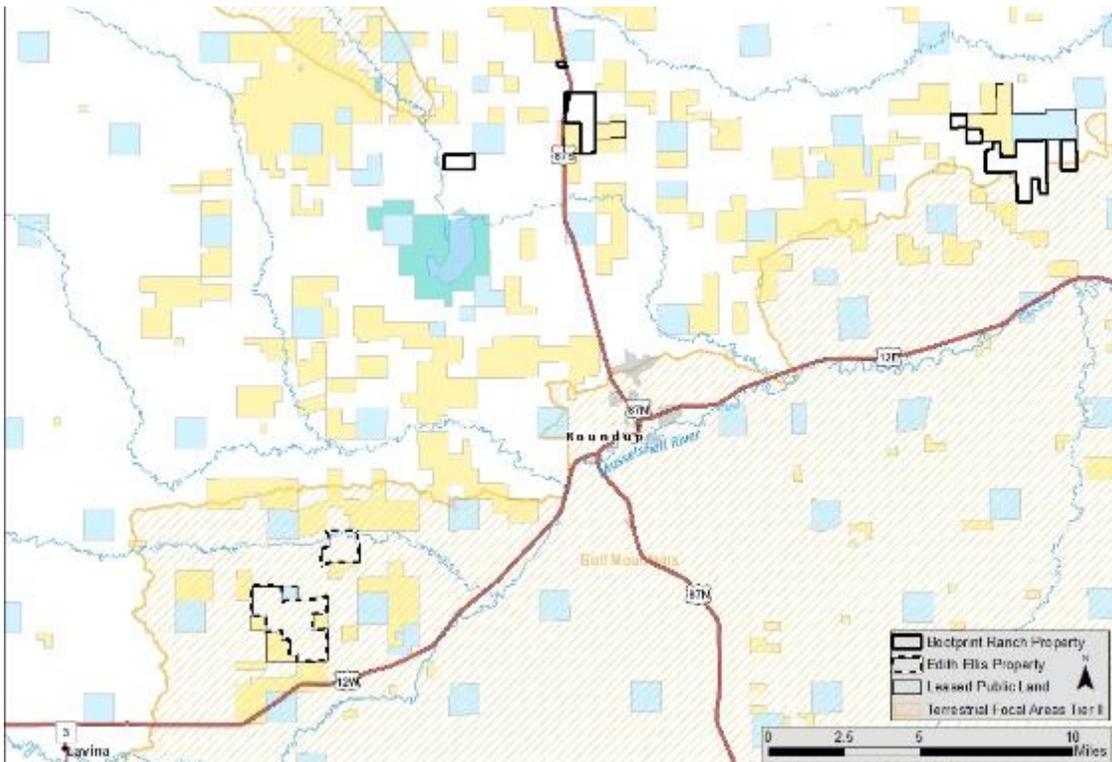
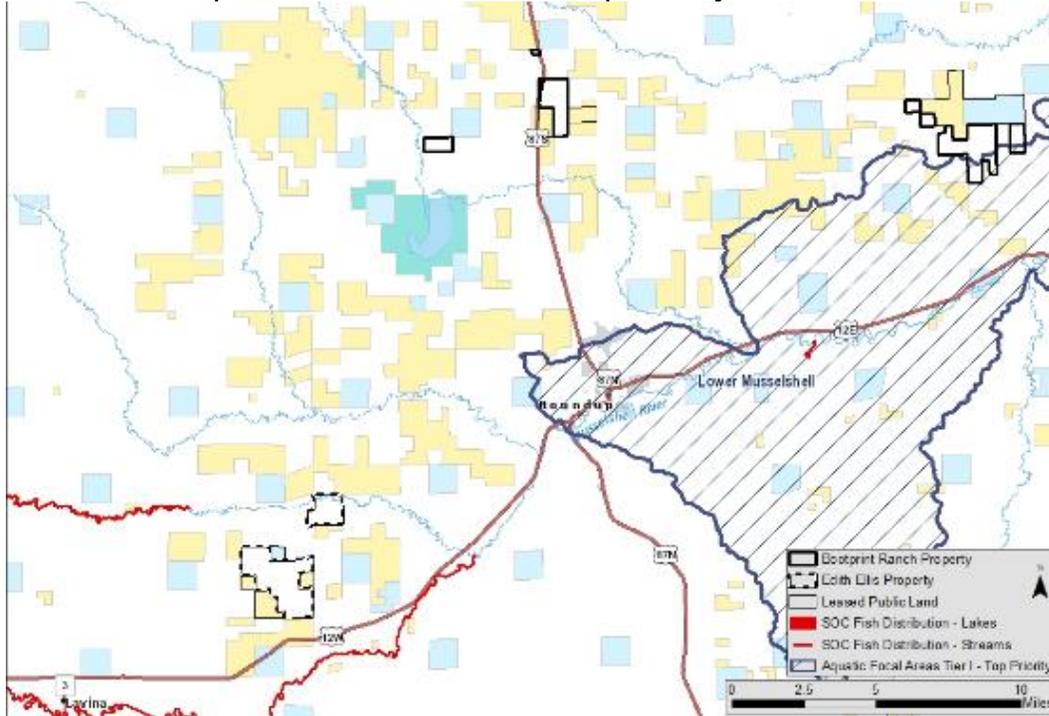


Figure 6. Bootprint and Edith Ellis Ranches overlaid on the SWAP Lower Musselshell Aquatic Focal Area Tier I – Top Priority.



## 8. Project-Level Strategic Criteria

### a) Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.

The Bootprint and Ellis Ranches provide excellent wildlife habitat in areas threatened by subdivision. These private lands include large sagebrush and prairie grasslands with ponderosa pine savannas that are critical in providing habitat for wildlife species such as elk, mule deer, pronghorn, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, and Merriam’s turkeys. Carnivores such as bobcat, mountain lion and the occasional black bear and wolf also use the property and neighboring landscapes. Nongame species such as golden and bald eagles, long-billed curlews, black-tailed prairie dogs, burrowing owls, and ferruginous hawks are also plentiful. Not only do most of these species utilize the large expanses of native grassland and ponderosa pine savannas throughout most of the year. These lands also provide critical winter range for additional wintering elk, mule deer and pronghorn. Protections such as this proposed conservation easement are critical in large landscape conservation of these native habitats.

### b) Threat Status: **PICK ONE** (and provide brief explanation)

- **IMMINENT - 10 pts:** *the land is proposed for activity within five years which will cause irreversible impacts.*

- **PROBABLE - 5 pts:** *strong trends in the vicinity of property have been toward conversion of the habitat (e.g., subdivision; cropland conversion), but no specific threat is underway.*
- **POSSIBLE- 2 pts:** *sporadic occurrences for habitat conversion, which may happen to the property, particularly as it changes ownership.*
- **UNLIKELY – 0 pts**

Probable:

A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP's ability to positively impact the habitat on this property through perpetual means. Subdivision into 20- and 40-acre parcels is a strong trend in the Roundup area. On the eastern boundary of the Bootprint Ranch is an existing subdivision and the Ellis Ranch has subdivisions nearby. In addition to the subdivision threat many properties along the Musselshell River and in ponderosa pine savanna habitat that hold elk, have undergone landownership changes in recent years. These landownership changes are often to buyers primarily interested in recreation over agricultural values, along with associated public access limitations. The heightened interest in occupied elk habitat in this hunting district makes protection of these private lands extremely critical. Several FWP 30-year sagebrush conservation leases are near the Bootprint Ranch because of the threat of sagebrush habitat conversion to tilled land. Ultimately the landowner's goal is to use the money from this sale to purchase more land in the area and put another FWP easement on that property. This is a win-win because he can grow his operation and FWP can protect more wildlife habitat.

c) **Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.**

Describe as follows:

- Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts) **Yes, Terrestrial Focal Areas Devils Basin Tier 1 and Bull Mountains Tier 2. Also, the Aquatic Focal Area Lower Musselshell Tier I – top priority.**
- Is this proposal part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts) **No**
- Does the proposal comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts) **No**
- Is the proposal within an identified priority area in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts) **Yes, Governor's Executive Sage Grouse Order (Core Area and General Habitat), Montana Sage Grouse Management Plan (Core Area).**
- Does the proposal support an identified connectivity area/corridor? (3 pts) **A pronghorn research project started January 2020 to identify migration corridors. The GPS collar project includes the Ellis Ranch and could show pronghorn use of the northern parcel of the Bootprint Ranch in the following years as data is collected.**

Bootprint and Ellis Ranches lie within 5 different community types identified for a greatest conservation need (CTGCN) as defined in SWAP. As part of habitat protection standards as outlined in SWAP, effort should be made to “continue to utilize Habitat Montana (FWP, 1994) and other funding sources to support opportunities to conserve high priority CTGCN through fee title acquisitions and conservation easements” (SWAP, 2015). This directive describes how diverse this landscape is and the importance of protecting it.

The property also provides habitat for at least three bird and one reptile species in greatest need of conservation (SWAP 2015). Per Montana Natural Heritage Program, there is one reptile and three bird Species of Concern on the property. All species present, or located nearby, can be influenced by land practices one private landowner implements.

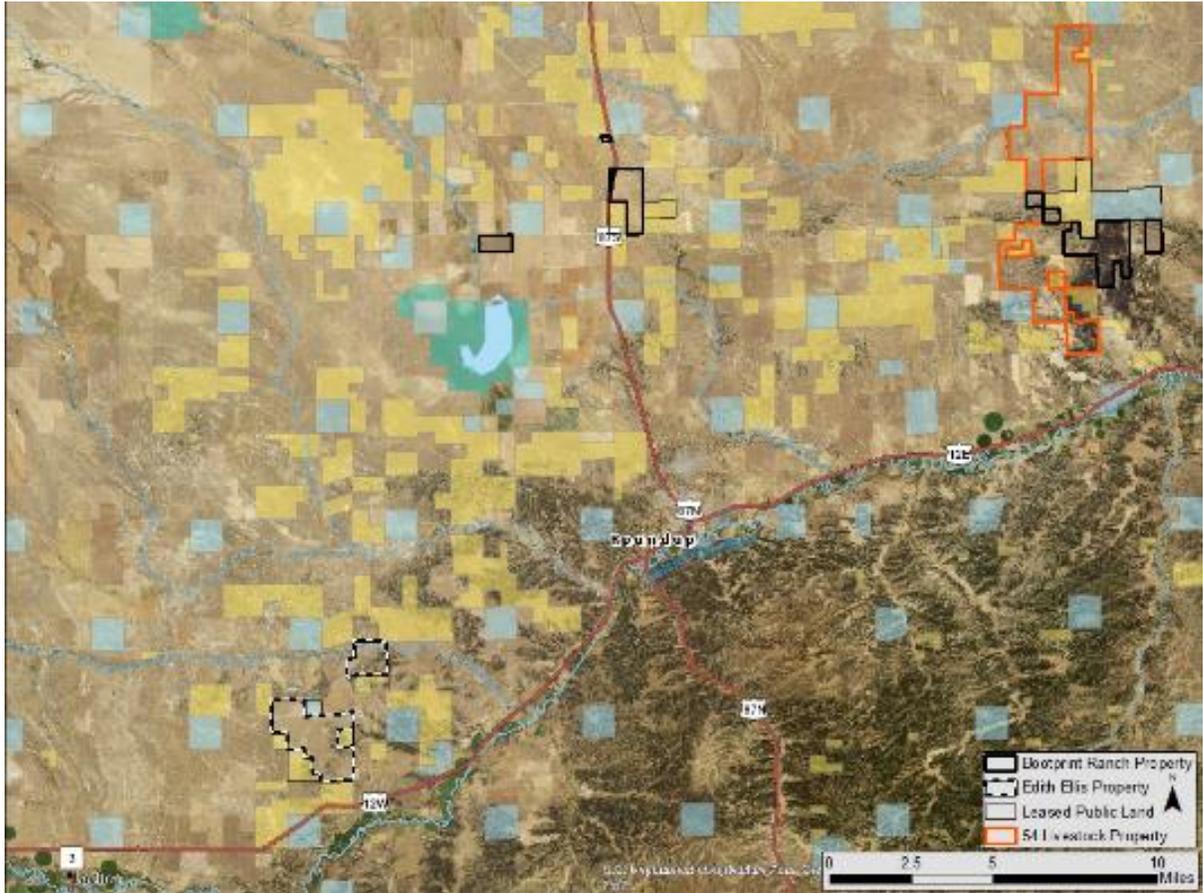
**d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.**

Bootprint Ranch consists of 3,416 deeded and 3,200 leased BLM and DNRC acres. This property is spread out among three parcels near Roundup. The property also provides access to approximately 1,190 BLM acres of legally adjoining public lands. Sum recreational access provided by the project is 7,806 acres.

Ellis Ranch consists of 3,143 deeded and 960 leased BLM and DNRC acres. This property is spread between two parcels. The property also provides access to approximately 8,960 (7,680 BLM and 1,280 DNRC) acres of legally adjoining public lands. Sum recreational access provided by the project is 13,063 acres. These properties are of sufficient size to be standalone conservation projects.

The conservation footprint of these two projects is bigger because these two ranches are spread out into multiple parcels that are adjacent to public lands. Sum acres between the two properties are 6,559 deeded and 4,160 leased BLM and DNRC acres. Sum recreational access provided by the two properties is 20,869 acres. In addition to these two properties’ potential conservation easements, The Nature Conservancy is also working on a 6,660 acre conservation easement, to include public access, on the 54 Livestock Ranch which is adjacent to the Bootprint Ranch (Figure 7). In addition, the 54 Livestock Ranch has a 30-year sagebrush conservation lease with FWP on approximately 2,000 acres located just north of the Bootprint Ranch. There are four 30-year sagebrush leases in the vicinity of this easement proposal. So, the conservation footprint of this project would add to existing conservation work in the area.

Figure 7. Bootprint and Edith Ellis Ranches overlaid with proposed TNC conservation easement on 54 Livestock.



e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.**

The Bootprint and Edith Ellis Ranches fall within FWP’s Deer/Elk Hunting District 530, Antelope Districts 513 and 530, and Bear Management Unit 580. This area has a long history of access challenges to elk and turkeys and slightly fewer access problems to mule deer. Both ranches are covered under the 411-20 either-sex elk permit. Although these elk are not currently counted towards the over objective Snowies Elk Management Unit, approximately 200 elk are now year-round residents in this north Musselshell River habitat. The over objective elk population in Hunting District 530 is well known and any permanent public access we can secure to elk habitat is critical to potentially increase elk harvest. In addition, the proximity of these properties to Billings ensures they will receive substantial public use in addition to local Musselshell County residents and other public users. Demand in this area is high for public access to mule deer, pronghorn, and turkey hunting in addition to elk.

The Bootprint Ranch is adjacent to the large Gage Dome BMA. In the past the Edith Ellis Ranch was leased to a nonresident and the Bootprint Ranch allowed limited public hunting. However, they are applying to enroll in Block Management for the 2020 hunting season. Wildlife viewing, photography, and hiking are other wildlife-related recreation available on these properties.

f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.**

Bootprint Ranch is owned fee title by Bill and Barb Wacker. All taxes are paid and up to date. Edith Ellis Ranch is owned fee title by Barb Wacker and her brother Jerry Ellis. All taxes are paid and up to date. Additional wildlife and/or habitat monitoring needs may be justified to develop baseline information to better understand current wildlife presence and distribution and/or monitor, maintain and/or improve habitat conditions.

Application of conservation easement covenants will be sufficient to perpetually protect the wildlife habitat and recreational values associated with this property. Various terms related specifically to nesting and wintering big game, native species and furbearer habitat will be addressed in the easement. Covenants will be implemented affecting housing development, grazing, mechanically modifying/burning/clearing vegetation, and insecticide/herbicide use. Both ranches have county road access to and through them. Fencing and water development infrastructure may be needed to implement an approved grazing plan. Weeds are present on the property but are at a manageable level.

## **REFERENCES**

Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2020b. Montana Species of Greatest Conservation Need List.

<https://apps.fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/fwpMapper/> accessed on 5/26/2020.

Montan Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2020b. Montana Species of Greatest Inventory Need List. Accessed on 5/26/2020.

<https://apps.fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/fwpMapper/>

Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan. 2015. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620.